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From "telling" to "engaging": a brief study of the educational role of museum in China

Jing Sun*

Leiden University, Leiden, 2334EX, The Netherlands

Abstract

Along with Chinese economic and political developments, museum in China also needs to facilitate encounters between ideas, environments and objects, so as to fulfill its fundamental role of education, for school students and also for the adults. In this article, I introduce and discuss contemporary issues and practice made in the museum education in China, such as education program and activities for student group, various cultural workshop and demonstrations for a more complete learning experience. The challenges and the changes from the old paradigm of “telling” to “engaging” with cultural, historical and scientific concepts will specifically be addressed in respect of the educational role of the Capital Museum, China.

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1. The Educational Role of Museum and Its Visitors

The first section is dedicated to the exploration of the educational role of museums in modern context, through reviewing the definition of museums, their educational function and purposes. Then I briefly discuss museum visitors, including their nature, needs and expectations. With the case study of the Capital Museum in Beijing, China, the second section discusses how the museum operates the exhibitions and activities for children education, and how the school children involve the programs and activities hosted by the Capital Museum. In the last section, the attention is paid to the adult education in the museum, especially considering the free-choice education.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: 0031715122660;
E-mail address: S.Jing@hum.leidenuniv.nl

The role of museum has reformed frequently due to the cultural and social structure of each era. According to the contemporary definition of museum from the International Council of Museum (ICOM), “Museum is a non-profit permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purpose of education, study and enjoyment”. In this definition, one of the essential roles of museums is to educate the public based on the collections and the exhibitions of objects.

Education as a crucial museum function has been recognized long time ago. As Hooper-Greenhill (1991) points out: “During the nineteenth century, education had been the prime function of the museum. The ideal museum was understood to be ‘the advanced school of self-instruction’, and the place where teachers should ‘naturally go for assistance’. Although many museums and galleries were unable to achieve this ideal, this was a firmly held view. By the 1920s this conviction, held so strongly by nineteenth-century thinkers in so many areas of intellectual and political life, was under attack. A new generation of curators was less interested in the public use of museums, and more interested in the accumulation of collections” (Hooper-Greenhill 1991:25). In modern society, its educational purposes have become a priority and its educational goals have increased (Hooper-Greenhill 1999:3). Museums know most about history, culture, art, technology and so forth. Museums should become places of freedom allowing children and adults to discover traditions, to broaden their horizons, to enrich their minds and to develop a mature opinion of life. They are important public educational institutes that not only shape knowledge to the scientific community but also share it with all kinds of visitor with their exhibitions. In fact, sharing knowledge with the public is also an essential mission of a museum. Therefore, museum is an educational institute, “with a responsibility to create knowledge through the development and research of collections, and then to disseminate that knowledge through the provision of formal scholarly displays” (Graham Black 1999:1).

However, to provide knowledge to the visitors, it does not mean that the museums should simplify the way they exhibit the objects nor provide complicated and hidden meanings. The education function needs to be collaborated by both museums and visitors. On the one hand, by displaying the artifacts and contextualizing them, museums help visitors to get their own understanding of the collections in museums. On the other hand, while forming their own interpretation of the meaning of the artifacts, visitors learn knowledge and experience museums as well (Greenhill 2000, 124). Therefore, museums need to consider and respond visitors’ needs, demands and expectations. This has been recognized by museums. Particularly in recent decades, museums have increasing pressures for changing the approaches of presenting their collections to visitors, appealing their interests and matching their high quality requirements.

This is also an audience-centered strategy which means museums need to take into account of “the personal context of the visitor and the holistic nature of the museum visit” (Graham Black 1999:3). When planning exhibitions and programs, museum educators and planners should not only understand the different types and ages of visitors, but also know the demands and expectations of different type of visitors, and know how different visitor groups would interact with the museum, its collections and the activities.

Unlike the traditional museum audience who were used to the un-stimulating educational programs, twenty-first century visitors would prefer to participate, to learn, to question and take part as equals, rather than being “passive recipients of wisdom from on high” (Graham Black 1999:2). This means modern museums should not only provide information for education and research, but provides a much wider variety of activities including exhibitions, workshops, events and displays, to arise the visitors’ interest and match their demands (Burcaw 1997, 24).

Under this circumstance, museums have to transform their role from simply displaying objects or offering un-stimulate programs into promoting the audience’s active learning with interactive activities. This is actually a very important transition process from simply “telling” the visitors knowledge to letting them “engage” into learning, to transfer a passive study to an active learning experience. More and more museums incorporate this strategy as part of their educational purpose. In China, along with the economic development, more and more

attentions have been paid on cultural development, and museums are also the important institutes to promote cultural development.

In the process to fulfill the education function, museums need to adjust their strategy according to the different type and ages of visitors and their needs. Many scholarly researches about the museum visitors have been done and there are also a lot of investigation and analysis on the targets. From the perspective of age, in this article, I prefer to generally divide the visitors into two major age-groups- school children who mainly visit museums in groups or families and adults who often visit museums by their own. On the basis of learning theories, in the following, I would like to analyze how museums in China attempt to meet these two types of visitor's needs, demands and expectations and accomplish the educational role of the museum. For a better understanding of the development of the museums in China, I discuss these perspectives mainly through the case studies of the Capital Museum in Beijing (see figure 1).



Fig. 1. The Exterior of the Capital Museum, China, http://www.capitalmuseum.org.cn/zjsb/content/2006-04/12/content_21830.htm

There are several reasons to choose the Capital Museum as example to demonstrate my arguments. Firstly, the Capital Museum is a large comprehensive museum in the Beijing area and it houses a large collection of ancient porcelain, bronze, calligraphy, painting, jade, sculpture, and Buddhist statues from imperial China as well as other Asian cultures. Although it is not the largest or most comprehensive museum in China, as a provincial and municipal-level museum, it has some characteristics which are able to reflect the current development and practices of the educational role of museums in China. Moreover, it opened in 1981 and moved into its present building in 2006. As it is housed in a newly construed building and equipped with modern facilities for various visitors, to a certain extent, it can also reflect future development of many other museums in China.

2. Children Learning in the Capital Museum

Regarding to children education in museum, there is mutual communication and close connection between the museum and schools. As pointed out by Joseph H. Suina, “for school, museums serve as places where people collect, display and share fragments of the world in which we live” (Hooper-Greenhill 1999:105). The museums

need to understand the different needs of different types and levels of school children so as to design programs that relate closely to that information.

This requires museum educators know learning theory about children in museums. G. W. Maxim describes that the young students learn through three modes of contact with material. The first type is through the symbolic mode. It is the most prevalent in elementary schools. But as most young children have limited experience, the symbolic mode is very abstract and too advanced for many elementary school students. The second type is the iconic mode as referred by Maxim. It involves the practice of representations of the reality through physical models, films and other means, so the students may get interaction with iconic material. The third mode is to learn from people and through events, ideas, and the use of authentic items (Maxim 1987:267-8). This is therefore an enactive form of learning experience. Students can learn best by experiencing the materials and ideas through touching, seeing, listening, smelling and tasting. So this is a quite different experience that students can rarely get from classroom where students usually passively get information and facts from textbooks. But museums which are rich with iconic and enactive learning opportunities can provide such experience for students.

This third mode has been applied by museum educators and planners of Capital Museum. They plan, arrange and inspire the activities with this purpose, while dealing with complex issues regarding the relationship between preserving and presenting the objects and the using in education. According to the degree of children's engagement into the programs and activities, I introduce and discuss some educational programs and activities hosted by the museum.

First and foremost, the Capital Museum provides many educational programs throughout the permanent collection. For example, one of the special programs and events hosted by the Capital Museum on May 18, 2013, the International Museum Day, is "The Little Pioneer Treasure Hunt". It goes like this: the children together with their parents spend a couple of minutes in the museum reception in order to become familiar with the museum spaces and get a form with instructions about the location and information of some "treasures", the valuable collections in the museum. After the children get the general idea about what they are supposed to do, their parents and the museum educators lead the children to the permanent collection. In order to find the "treasures", children are motivated to observe the objects and learn history and the related knowledge. In this leaning process, they also have lots of fun. Moreover, this activity also provides an opportunity for the parents especially those who are too busy to stay at home, to spend time with their children, to educate them, and try to broaden their horizons through the stimulating learning process.

Moreover, the Capital Museum also plans many interactive activities, such as workshops that are designed to provide children to recreate artifacts. For instance, there is a pottery room which regularly offers pottery class for children to learn how to make potteries out of clay and learn the pottery history in China (figure 2). Museum educators first show children the producing procedure, and then guide and assistant them to make the pottery objects. The process of making pottery involves knowledge of many disciplines and skills, such as Chinese traditional decoration and the firing skill. This allows children to learn Chinese cultural heritage and traditional art through learning how to produce the works by themselves, and enriched their sharing of knowledge and cooperation. Except for the pottery class, the Capital Museum also provides many other educational and interactive activities, such as making Chinese traditional fan, paper cuts and so forth (figure 3), for children regularly all year round in the museum. So this also offers children choices that they are allowed to choose to take part in those which are interesting to them and to freely attend these activities. By doing so, educators give children the feeling of power and command over their museum experience, and also increase the chances of their really understanding of the ideas behind the objects in museums.



Fig. 2. The Pottery Class at the Capital Museum, http://www.capitalmuseum.org.cn/child/content/2011-06/16/content_30620.htm



Fig. 3. The workshop for Children at the Capital Museum, http://www.capitalmuseum.org.cn/child/content/2013-05/22/content_58108.htm

Furthermore, the Capital Museum uses a very wide variety of approaches to provide comprehensive knowledge to children, not only about its collections, but also about some knowledge of its own architecture, facilities and even the moral behaviors through vivid stories which are made up by museum educators. Children can easily read them through the website of the museum. For instance, when introducing the function of the ceiling of the Capital museum, a dialogue takes place between a virtual character “Grandpa Dictionary” and two children, a boy and a girl. “Grandpa Dictionary” makes a metaphor of the ceiling as a big hat and explains to the children how the solar panels atop of the ceiling convert light into electricity. Embellished with vivid cartoons (figure 4), scientific knowledge and information of the architecture conveyed by these stories are more interesting and easier for children to learn and understand. And except for these stories, the Capital Museum also uses the Internet to provide many other interesting and stimulating programs for children, such as the on-line videos about

the collections in the museum, various video games leading an archaeological expedition, the making of blue-white porcelain and so forth.

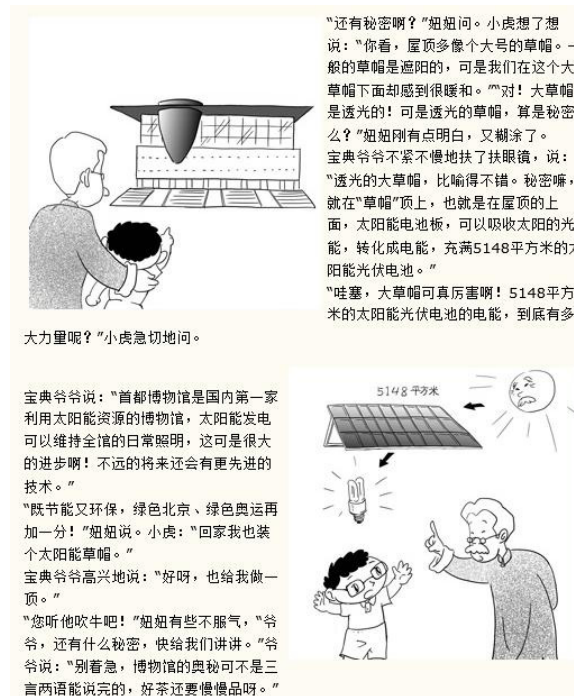


Fig. 4. Story Embellished with Cartoons on the Website of the Capital Museum, http://www.capitalmuseum.org.cn/child/content/2008-03/13/content_23056.htm

To inspire and motive children to get involve of the activities of the museum and to engage into the collections and learning experiences, the Capital Museum also creates new exhibitions for children. An impressive example is the exhibition of school children's art works. In June 2013, "The Dancing Sprout: An Art Exhibition of Children's work in Beijing" (figure 5) is host by the Capital Museum, exhibiting various art works, such as calligraphy, painting, paper cuts, sculpture, masks and so forth, made by children in Beijing between age 4 and 14. It is very creative and quite entertaining experience for children. Moreover, children get the opportunity to control the exhibition by choosing the subjects and displaying their own works. And this is a very important process of getting engaged into the museum's activities.



Fig. 5. Exhibition of Children's Art Work at the Capital Museum, http://www.capitalmuseum.org.cn/child/content/2012-06/08/content_42082.htm

Through the collections and the activities, on the one hand, museums provide knowledge and information to children; on the other hand, they also stimulate their academic and thinking skills, handing ability, understanding, values and attitude of life and the society. By participating in different programs children have the opportunity to not only obtain knowledge of the past, discover new things, but also learn to cooperate with other people and have discipline while in public spaces through the museum programs.

3. Adult Education in the Capital Museum

In addition to the children's education, the Capital Museum also focuses on adult education. In fact, the idea of adult learning in museums is not new. As early as mid-nineteenth century, a comment from the First Report of the Department of Practical Art, the government institution that originally ran the Victoria and Albert Museum, demonstrates this well: "A Museum presents probably the only effectual means of educating the adult, who cannot be expected to go to school like the youth" (Hooper-Greenhill 1999:137).

Adult learning is different from that of children. Compared with children, adults view and evaluate the objects according to their broader life experiences, established identity and understanding of the world, so their education is generally under a mature scope. As R. S. Grenier points out: "Adult learning has the potential to transform museum experiences into meaningful learning opportunities that occur in relation to sociocultural surroundings and stimulate the visitors' curiosity and active and reflexive learning through nonformal education, free-choice learning, and access to museum resources" (Grenier 2010:153).

Adults seek learning experience in museums related to their demands and needs, no matter for leisure time, values, education or other considerations. Adult's free-choice learning has been further interpreted that "the learner is intrinsically motivated by their desire to discover more about the world, gain information, and enhance their current understanding" (Grenier 2010:153). Therefore, museum should develop alternative approaches to respond the free-choice learning, and represent visitors with "smaller segments that are more easily processed and integrated into prior experiences and learning" (Grenier 2010:154). The Internet and other forms of new technology play important roles for adult's free-choice learning in museum. The Capital Museum provides

anytime, anywhere learning for visitors with detailed resources, information and educational material for study, research and entertainment purposes through the Internet and new technology its extensive databases.

For instance, on the website of the Capital Museum, there is an Internet forum called “Interactive Community”. Here, visitors can share their opinions on the collections and related issues, discuss the artifacts and involve into the development of the museum. And they can also download the online journals of the museum and other information of the exhibition, to choose the content they are interested and better learn knowledge. As a result, visitors interact with the objects more and better understand the concepts and the initial idea of the exhibition. In this way, the museum is not simply to present the objects to the audience but to make the audience part of the museum through the sources and learning programs. Museums as educational institutes offer opportunities for people to increase their knowledge and their experiences by combining education and entertainment.

Similarly, the Capital Museum also arranges some specific exhibitions for the adult visitors, not only limited within its own collections, but also expanding to the works made by the audience. For instance, an exhibition “The Beauty of Beijing, Beijing Spirit” (see figure 6) was held at the Capital Museum from February 5 to May 19, 2013. Like all the other exhibitions, it is also free to the public. In this exhibition, many shutterbugs’ works representing various aspects of Beijing and people living here are displayed. In this way, not only many visitors are engaged into the exhibitions with their own works, but also more and more visitors learn deeper the culture of Beijing through these works. And this also makes the museum no more a very high institute, but a public place close to the visitors’ life and they can have interaction and entertainment, and learn knowledge through participating the activities and programs of the museum.



Fig. 6. A Photography Exhibition at the Capital Museum, http://capitalmuseum.org.cn/zlxx/content/2013-02/05/content_50040.htm

4. Conclusion

As discussed above, the activities and educational programs hosted by the Capital Museum expand visitor's learning experience beyond the museum's door. From the highly structured study programs which are planned and delivered by the museum to less formal or free-choice learning experience that provided by the museum; from the simply displaying objects to the visitors' engaging including choosing and exhibiting their own works, the capital museum is taking a more sociocultural perspective which emphasizes visitors' experience in relation to its collections, museum context and the society, to fulfill its educational function. The exhibitions and programs will make visitors satisfy museum experiences and will also allow museums to maximize the inherent potential of objects to contribute to human growth and learning. By taking part in educational programs and activities in the Capital Museum and its website, the visitors, no matter children or adults, have the opportunity to learn knowledge, to share discussion, debates and social interactions. And this also expands the role of life-long learning of the museum.

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